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The Gender of the Trick
Female Tricksters and Male Narrators

Abstract

Western theories of myth (Radin, Babcock-Abrahams) have defined the trickster as a particularly complex and ambivalent mythological figure involved with creative cosmological events and with mythical moments when the order of things, physical or social, is undergoing transformation. Tricksters in folktales are akin to, but not identical with, the mythological forms. While one prominent feature of the trickster's personality is gender ambiguity, the trickster is almost always conceived in Western comparative theory as a male who can transform or disguise himself as a female, usually with comical and highly disorderly results. These theories do not adequately address the very rich topic of female tricksters (*makkāra*) in Middle Eastern popular literature and folklore genres. This paper compares two female trickster tales performed by a single adult male narrator in Herat, Afghanistan, particularly the portrayals of female agency by a male speaker, with reference to theories of the trickster and of gender-centeredness in texts.

Keywords: trickster—gender—oral literature—genre theory—myth theory

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THE TOPIC OF WOMEN'S TRICKS—*makr-e zan* or *kayd un-nisā*—is a particularly rich one in Islamic literature, written and oral, and in popular thought. Women are considered to excel even the devil himself in trickery, as various Persian proverbs and aphorisms attest.[1] A very rich discussion on this topic with regard to Persian literature has been initiated by MERGUERIAN and NAJMABADI (1997), and continued by NAJMABADI and other authors in *Iranian Studies* 32(2) (1999). Among the topics taken up by Najmabadi herself is the question of female participation in the enjoyment of stereotyping narratives that portray women as ruled by *nafs,* the earthly part of the soul and its appetites, and serving it through their guile. Najmabadi's own reflections on possible feminist readings of the "Yusof-Zolayxa" story, the *locus classicus* for literary concepts of the guileful woman in the Qur'ān and its derivatives, by implication inspire closer inspection of possible subversive/resistive uses of misogynist oral tradition by traditional women who are observably not participants in the last century's feminist movement (MILLS 1999 and 2000a).

In the same time frame as this discussion, Marilyn JURICH's ambitiously researched *Scheherazade's Sisters* (1998) has appeared, undertaking a worldwide review of female trickster stories, juxtaposed to and critiquing, in a distinctly late-twentieth-century feminist mode, the predominantly male-centered comparative theory of the trickster in myth and literature. Unfortunately, her primary positioning as a contemporary feminist reader of folktale and related literature from the earliest known texts (Pharaonic Egypt) onward, and from all over the world, while it presents a rich tapestry, involves her at times in highly presentist, under-contexted, and under-theorized readings of individual stories of vastly differing (and often uncertain) provenance, genre, and formal qualities. This contrasts with Najmabadi's very sophisticated contemporary feminist reading procedure, which directly discusses the repositioning of texts in the minds of their audiences over time. Jurich's less reflexive exercise also involves her in intermittent over-generalizations about the psychosocial positions of male (and by implication, female)

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storytellers and audiences both oral and literary.

The discussion I want to extend here has thus centered, in various ways, on feminist reclaiming of texts that have passed through a masculinist filter in literary treatment. On examining oral performance texts of folktales I recorded in Persian-speaking Afghanistan in the peacetime of the 1970s, I do not find that the pervasive misogyny observable in some literary texts, and assumed (e.g., by JURICH 1998, 29[2]) to be operating fairly uniformly among male narrators, applies very well to the oral corpus I am able to examine. My analysis of examples from this group of about 500 separate performances is facilitated by better knowledge of contexts of performance: I was able to interview and record at least basic biographical data from the tellers, and knew the time, place, occasion, and who else was present at each recording session, being present myself in almost all cases. Extensive exposure to oral performances by women and men in a single community and time period also informs one's reception of individual performed texts. All of these factors have direct effects on the storyteller's particular framing of a well-known tale (cf. RADNER 1989). By framing, I mean the opening and closing circumstances that provide the proximate motivation and evident resolution for the chain of events that comprise the tale's main plot. While a particular framing may not be part of deep narrative structure in any obvious way, insofar as framing can be very varied from one performance or one tale variant to another,[3] nevertheless framing is crucial to questions of how male- vs. female-centeredness is accomplished narratively, and of misogyny vs. inter-gender solidarity and the particular forms those positions can take. Issues of centering or focus must be addressed to specific performances of tale variants, not to composite or abstract tale types. Torborg LUNDELL (1989) has already explored gender-biased distortions in the basic analytic research tools for folk narrative, the tale type and motif indexes devised by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. She traces the distortion problem to the scholars' analytic assumptions characterizing female actors as supporting, rather than central, characters.

The task of this essay, then, is to begin to rethink manifestations of male- vs. female-centeredness and of misogyny vs. inter-gender solidarity (or for that matter male-bashing) in traditional folktales told by men and women. By the "gender- (male or female) centering" of a text I mean the focus of the narrative on one or more characters as protagonist and/or chief beneficiary of the plot, and also, more generally, the perspective of the character from which the tale achieves resolution. I shall illustrate some of the possibilities for male-centering of texts with female protagonists, using just two traditional tales performed by one adult male storyteller within a six-month period. Because these protagonists are tricksters, the tales in their

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performance context also serve to illustrate complexities of the *makr-e zan* (women's tricks) stereotype or topos, which is by no means univocally misogynistic, even in the hands of men (cf. MILLS 1999). The refinement of feminist reading that this limited comparison puts forward is that male storytellers, while remaining male-centered in their renditions of tales, may not necessarily be misogynist in any obvious way. This interpretation offers data for understanding dimensions of male-female solidarity in a highly patriarchal environment, such as the village and working-class urban of Muslim Afghanistan this storyteller inhabits. While the gender ideology of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan between 1995 and 2001, much criticized in the West, has promulgated abroad and at home a stereotype of a particularly severe misogyny and fear of female mobility (intellectual, professional or physical), a close study of oral tradition helps to reveal more complex positive and negative dimensions of power relations among the sexes, as played out in traditional expressive culture.

The discussion here is limited to *afsāna,* one type of oral fantasy literature, which should not be confused with "real-world" ethnographic data any more than *Bay Watch* in late-twentieth-century American television should be conflated with U.S. gender ethnography in daily life. Expressive culture, however, is itself a complex system and an important dimension of total cultural practice which, within the genre constraints of different types of speech events (e.g., folktale as compared with oral history, personal experience narrative, religious legend, epic, romance, lament, lyric poetry), provides a window on conceptual possibilities if not directly on other types of cultural practice.

Gender politics are inevitably wrapped up with the ethos and aesthetics of power relations in general in *afsāna* (as is true of folktale worldwide). Guile (*makr, kayd*) or trickery can be categorized as a weapon of the weak, and thus quintessentially of women. There is an abundance of male tricksters as well, and not all of them are underdogs, but a trickster in a position of power or acting on behalf of the power elite (e.g., an evil vizier and/or his old-woman accomplice) is inevitably the one who loses to the less socially powerful hero or heroine. Tricks work best for underdogs, though not only underdogs are tricksters. Trickery as a concept includes various forms of deception, including duplicitous persuasive techniques (seduction, etc.), sleight-of-hand, and conjuring (which may in some cases cross over into *jādu,* sorcery), and, of course, disguise (which may include magical disguise or shape-changing).

One might, among male heroes' strategies, distinguish between strategies of guile and strategies of force (combat, etc.), but in the case of female heroes, the strategies of force generally entail the woman functioning as a pseudo-male, in male disguise, so that the performance of martial feats for a

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woman is subsumed under the guileful category of disguise, or at least necessitates its co-deployment. No matter how much of a virtuoso such a woman is in martial arts, the well-kept secret of her sex, which is both an additional weapon and an additional risk or vulnerability, gives her martial capacities the force of trickery as well.

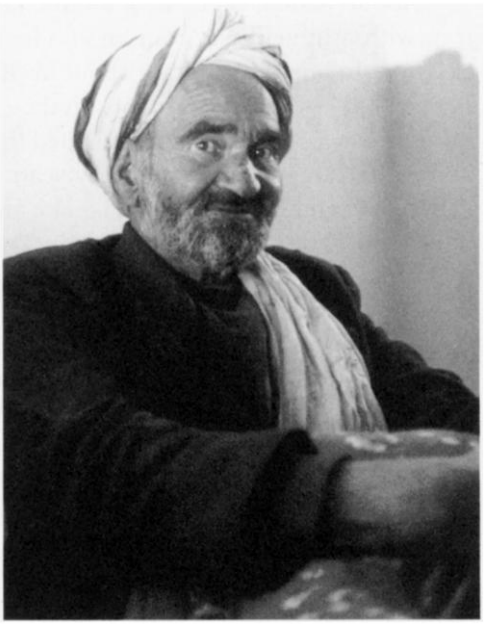

FIGURE 1. The storyteller Abdul Wāhed, 1975

The two stories under discussion here illustrate two types of female tricksters, the one whose sphere of action is domestic, private, and female (the *andarun* or harem-space), and the one who ventures as well into the male sphere of martial endeavor and quest. The story of the first type was told to me by Abdul Wāhed, an impoverished villager resident in Injil District, Herat Province, in February 1975, only a month after my arrival for research. This was the very first story he told in our first recording session together. My grasp of Herat dialect Persian was quite limited at that point, and I believe he simplified his speaking style, making the story text more simply, almost ritually, repetitive in its details, to accommodate my limited comprehension. The story of the second type he recorded for me six months later, when my conversational abilities had considerably improved and we had gotten to know one another more. His style in that performance was more expansive.

Due to space constraints, close textual analysis of the complete texts, which certainly has relevance to the portrayal of women, must be left for another venue. The present analysis will be based on observations available from propositional analysis of tale summaries offered here in English.

On both recording occasions, Wāhed and I were joined and supported by my research associate, Aminollah Azhar, then an economics student at Kabul University on home leave for vacation, and his father, Nizāmuddin, a respected elder and former village headman. They knew Wāhed well as a local agricultural worker and gifted storyteller and they invited him to come and tell me stories. The recordings were made in the guest room of their house in Taw Beryān Village.[4]

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Abdul Wāhed, called *lang* or "the lame," was a small man, under five feet, with a hunchback from an accident at birth. He was single, without children. In one conversation about his life experiences, he mentioned having worked at various guard jobs in the city of Herat. He did not know the place or date of his birth, but estimated that he and his family had first come to Taw Beryān Village about thirty years before. I estimated Wāhed's age at between 45 and 50. He was not literate and had had no opportunity to go to school. He had come back to reside in Taw Beryān, at his deceased brother's sons' house, within the past year. One nephew lived there, keeping the household going, while the other two were guest workers in Iran. In the village he worked at various minimally-paid jobs that did not require great physical strength and helped his nephews with house maintenance, e.g., making mud bricks to repair some rain damage. In the summer among other things he would work as a night guard on melon fields, which were subject to theft during the harvest season. He had been poor all his life and, according to him, had a wife who left him. Others were under the impression that he had never married. He was a well-known figure in the village, appreciated for his verbal skills and invited occasionally to household social events as a raconteur/storyteller. Ultimately, he recorded forty different prose tales for me, plus a few verse recitations. Despite his lack of literacy, he performed items that also exist in popular literature, including a version of the Tale of Nur ud-din Ali and Anis al-Jalis from the Thousand and One Nights, episodes from the *Amir Hamza Nāma,* versions of the chapbook romances of *Šāhzāda Šerbiya* and *Najmā' Širāzi,* and the frame tale of the *Tuti-nāma.* As far as I know, no one paid for storytelling in Herat villages at that time. I made a practice of compensating storytellers for the time that they spent with me, sometimes extensive, at about the same rate they would earn as a daily-waged agricultural worker, since that rate was deemed appropriate locally.

Let us look at the story summaries in order of performance.

FIRST STORY: ABDUL WĀHED, "NAJJĀRI" (A CARPENTER)[5]

A successful carpenter with a good house, a wife, etc., goes to another city in search of better work, leaving his wife with a servant and a supply of food.

The Carpenter goes to a carpenter's shop in the new city and is hired. The King sees some doors he has made, admires them, and questions him about where he got his skill. "From my father," he replies. The King invites him to come to court, because he considers him a man of understanding. The King offers him a daughter in marriage but he declines, saying "I have a wife who is perfectly virtuous."

The King asks where his home is. "In Herat," he replies. The King asks for and gets the exact address then, leaving his vizier to rule, he goes off to

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Herat to see whether the woman is as virtuous as the Carpenter has said.

The King arrives in Herat and gets local directions to the Carpenter's house. The Wife's female servant sees the rider coming and they prepare the guest room to receive him. (Wāhed inserts "local color" details about heating up the room, it being winter, etc.)

The King tells the servant that he's been sent by the Carpenter to get news of his family. He insists the Wife come and eat with him, or he won't eat. She finally complies, but sits behind the lamp-stand, where she is less visible, while he eats.

The King notices large stakes, four pieces of wood, driven into the corners of the room. The Wife explains that she has four brothers who, when they return shortly and find out she has a male guest, will string him up by the four stakes, beat him to death and drop him down a well. The King says, "Don't you have a place to hide me?"

She takes him to the innermost room ("of forty") in the house, and locks him in. In the morning he asks to be let out "to pray,"[6] but she replies, "If you were a religious man, you wouldn't have come here like this," and leaves him imprisoned there. She forces him to work for food, picking the fiber out of cotton bolls (*ḡoza*) for his daily bread and water.

After the King has been away for two months, the Vizier goes to the Carpenter's shop, sees the Herati, repeats the King's questions and his offers, and gets the same response: "My wife is so pure your daughter's hand would pollute her shoes."

The Vizier asks where his house is in Herat, leaves the Vakil (deputy minister) on the throne, and rides to Herat, to the Carpenter's house. The servant girl sees him coming again and they ready the guest room, with the stakes, etc., as before. The guest is again received hospitably by the servant, and the Vizier, in turn, demands that the Wife join him for dinner.

There is a polite exchange of greetings, then the same inquiry about the stakes, and the same answer. She puts him in the inner room with the King, who curses him, in the dark, for messing up the cotton he's been cleaning and sorting (audience laughter).

In the morning, the Vizier also asks to be let out to pray and she repeats her answer. The King recognizes the Vizier, but he doesn't recognize the King in his unkempt whiskers, etc. The Wife also makes the Vizier work for food, combing the seeds out of the cotton fiber the King has extracted from the bolls. The Vizier wears out his hands, which swell up, being unaccustomed to women's work.

Meanwhile the Vakil, back in the King's city, goes to the bazaar, meets the Carpenter, repeats the King's question and the offer of a daughter, and gets the same response from the Carpenter, including the address of the

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Carpenter's house in Herat (with further details of local color added).

The Vakil leaves the Qāzi (chief judge) on the throne and goes off to Herat to test the woman. Asking directions locally, like the others, he arrives at the house and is received like the others. The conversation over the meal and the threat of the Wife's brothers are repeated, and then she hides him, at his request, in the inner room with the other two. The Vizier yells at him, "Don't step on the *alāji* (carding tool) and break it!" The King yells, "Bastard, don't mess up the cotton!" (more laughter).

In the morning the Vakil calls to be let out to pray and the Wife repeats her response. She also sets him to work for his food, giving him an old quilt to take apart and beat the matted cotton stuffing with two pairs of thin sticks (see Figure 2), to fluff it up.

Another month passes and another king gets word that the King has disappeared from his city, so he demands tribute from the now kingless city. The Qāzi asks the King's young son what to do but he replies, "I'm just a child, how should I know?"

The Qāzi then asks officers of the army, in turn, but "They said nothing." The King's son then goes to the Carpenter's shop, tells the Carpenter, who is now the head of the carpenters, what has happened and asks his advice. On the back of the second king's *farmān* (order) demanding tribute, the Carpenter writes that the King et al. have gone traveling and haven't yet returned. He asks for a period to find the King and pass on the demand, saying, "You're confronting children here" to shame the aggressor. The second king accepts the request for delay.

One month passes with no news and the second king sets out to get an answer. Asking for fifteen days more, the Carpenter says to himself, "Whatever was done, my wife did it," and goes home to investigate.

His wife welcomes him, but he says, "What did you do with them?" "Nothing." He says, "I know you did it." They go and open the room (with a comic description of the three prisoners). All three recognize and greet the Carpenter. He brings them out, cleans them up, gets them bathed and shaved, clothes them properly, and tells them to go defend their city.

They insist that he come with them. He moves to the new city with his household.

They make the Carpenter king, the old King giving him his daughter as wife with a large (and formulaic) wedding feast. Wāhed ended the story with traditional closing formulas and audience laughter.

In the brief interview after the performance, he reported that he learned stories from other people (not from books), and called this one *xānegi* ("household," thus not *ḵetābi* "literary").

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STORY ANALYSIS

The options for male- vs. female-centering in this story are manifest: while the core action of the story, elaborately repeated, is perpetrated by a female trickster, her deeds are caused and framed by the words and deeds of her absent husband. Thus, depending on the teller's framing, this tale could be about a wife with an absent husband, passing tests of her virtue, or a husband with an accomplice trickster-wife, whose actions contribute to his project even at a distance.[7] Wāhed from the outset frames the tale as belonging to the man, since he entitles the story simply "A Carpenter" (*najjāri*). Most *afsāna* did not have explicit titles. If I asked a teller for a "title" (*onvān*) I might get a plot summary, or a recapitulation of the first few events of the plot. If I asked its "name," I usually got nothing more than a blank look or an observation that the tale didn't have any particular name. So it is questionable how stable Wāhed's designation of this story is, but for present purposes, he has designated it as being "about" (centered on) a carpenter, not about his wife primarily.

Secondly, the Carpenter's response to the King's question, "Where did you get your skill?" confirms a respect for patriarchy that the King shares: "From my father." This answer is partly responsible for the King's deciding that the Carpenter is a sagacious man, worthy to be invited to court. The urban artisan's exceptional skill also qualifies him for the status of courtier. The Carpenter has migrated from his home city, Herat, to another city in search of professional advancement: the consciousness of the story is thus situated in the male urban artisanal world, with the royal court as an alien but possibly fruitful opportunity zone.

The Carpenter's refusal of a royal second wife might at first seem to be a rejection of polygamy. There is enough comic narrative in the traditional verbal art of Herati men, portraying the miseries of the man with two wives, to support an hypothesis of male rejection of polygamy (or at least ambivalence toward it). Yet in the end, the Carpenter unhesitatingly accepts a royal second wife as "reward" for his virtues and services rendered in rescuing the King and his colleagues. Certain details in the telling help us to understand this change of heart. First of all, his bold response to the offer of a royal daughter, "My wife is so pure your daughter's hand would pollute her shoes," does not reject second marriage as such; it only calls in question the relative quality or status of the offered bride, compared to the wife he already has.[8] In the end, when he is offered and accepts a royal bride, it is part of his apotheosis, as the ratification of transfer of the kingdom itself to him. He marries not as a courtier taking a spare daughter off the King's hands, but as his adoptive heir. In this scene, his virtuoso first wife has no part and no apparent say; it is this aspect of the story that seems to me to be a most defin-

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itive male-centering of the story in its overall trajectory.

The Carpenter's prideful rejection of the first offer of a princess, no doubt an offensive challenge to the King, Vizier, etc., is also a kind of assertion of local pride. The proud and able Herati artisan yields little deference even to the "royals" of the other city. He boasts about his wife's virtue, and immediately his place of origin, and her location, are brought to bear on the case by the King's questions. The King will challenge the Wife's virtue, but he must do so on her turf, which is also, emphatically, the Carpenter's home place. Herat is so featured in this story, through its repeated mention and through Wāhed's specific descriptions of the neighborhoods through which each traveler finds his way to the Carpenter's house, that it almost becomes one of the characters. Wāhed is not alone among Herati male narrators in my collection, in his aesthetic use of geographical pride of place for narrative elaboration. The description of the city's public geography also evokes a masculine consciousness: street maps are perhaps less prominent in women's heads, since they spend much less of their lives in the public zones of the city.

Wāhed's evocation of the inner world of the Carpenter's Wife, the female sphere of her home, is no less vivid, however. Sitting as we were in the warm guestroom of our hosts, on a wintry February day, Wāhed evokes this coziness in describing how the Wife has her servant warm the guestroom to prepare for the guest. Thus he links the hospitality of our actual hosts to that of the fictional Herati household and evokes a sensory parallel between our own immediate experience in the performance setting and the sensorium of the imagined world, making it more immediate, more "real."

The Carpenter's Wife's sphere is exclusively female. She lives in her home alone with the support of one female servant, with supplies of food the Carpenter has left them to tide them over while he goes off to find work. When she realizes that they are about to receive a strange and apparently distinguished male guest, allegedly sent by her husband, she makes appropriate arrangements to receive and host him without compromising her virtue. She directs the servant to provide him with refreshment and relay messages to and from the guestroom. The King's (Vizier's, Vakil's) refusal to accept food unless the Wife appears at dinner is an act of guestly tyranny: to let a guest go unfed is a source of great shame, but for a woman to eat with a strange man is tantamount to fornication.

The predicament of temporarily female-headed households of absent male guest-workers was an everyday reality for a good many Herati and other families in the 1970s, when Afghan labor migration to Iran, and secondarily to the Gulf States, was at its peak. Most families, like Wāhed's nephews, would contrive to leave one adult male in residence to supervise the extended family while the other men migrated, but not all families had

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the configuration of brothers or father and sons needed to do this. The Carpenter's Wife's virtuoso defense of her chastity is an ideal statement of a common and current social concern. She invokes the apparently fictional threat of her brothers in order to put the King, Vizier, and Vakil into her own power. It is interesting, too, that Wāhed has her express no fear for her own safety in enunciating the threat. The logic of this dramatic moment can be interpreted in two ways: the Capenter's Wife is either (1) taking as given the everyday understanding that a woman taken in adultery could herself be killed by her husband or brothers, without criminal responsibility, or (2) the threat of the brothers, in a generic folktale frame, simulates the psychological "slot" of the threat of the returning ogre or band of thieves in tales with a questing male hero, such that the King et al. readily assume that the woman, though at first visibly reluctant to interact with them at all, has been seduced (or else needs to act in self-protection) and will therefore be their ally and protector.

The female trickster in defense of her own virtue frequently makes such a switch from potential prize/victim to pseudo-ally, as her definitive strategic move in taking control of those who threaten her. Furthermore, in this story as in others, what she does to them is a quintessentially female move: she incarcerates them in a dark, close space (a trunk or cupboard, or in this case, a darkened inner room of her house, "the innermost room" in Wāhed's playful hyperbole). In this story, though—unlike other variants—not only does she immobilize them in this womblike prison, pointedly forbidding them the normal adult male's access to public communal prayer[9] (and thus, escape), but also she deftly annexes them to her own domestic female economy: she forces them to take up women's work in order to be fed and survive.

The processing of raw cotton of a closed-bole type was the common winter task of Herati village women prior to the Afghan government's introduction of open-bole cotton, the seed of which was furnished to farmers as part of a government monopoly. The government would then buy back the crop and machine-process it for export. In the 1970s, this conversion of the cotton technology was recent enough (late 1950s–1960s) that all adults were familiar with the old work pattern, in which women would break open the closed bolls of the traditional crop using a wooden stick, pick the fiber out, card it by hand, and spin it, and weave the homespun cotton (*ḳayrbāz*) or have it woven in bazaar shops operated by men. The processing work was done indoors on winter days and evenings, sometimes in groups, and (as I was told) provided an occasion for gossip and storytelling. The cloth was traditionally used for clothing as well as household linens. Locally hand-woven *ḳayrbāz* was still available in the Herat bazaar in limited quantities in the

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mid-1970s, but hand-processing of cotton had all but disappeared from Herati women's lives. Some conversational attention was given to what women might do for domestic work and income to replace it, but no substitute was found. The work was regarded as demanding; thus in Wāhed's portrayal, the Vizier's elite male hands are comically weak compared to those of women accustomed to this work.

FIGURE 2. Fluffing cotton batting with willow wands (Taw Beryān, summer 1975).

The dismantling and revamping of cotton batting–stuffed quilts and mattresses, the task assigned to the Vakil, in the 1970s was still a normal female domestic chore, rather dusty and nasty. More affluent village homes might hire another woman to come, bringing with her a set of light willow sticks or wands with which she would rhythmically beat the matted cotton batting removed from the quilts, fluffing it back up and releasing large quantities of dust in the process. In the cities, itinerant men were also available to fluff the cotton using a distinctive wooden-framed tool like a large, one-stringed harp. The metal string, strummed so as to strike the piled-up, matted cotton, breaks up the mats and fluffs the fibers.

While Wāhed's portrayal of a vanishing domestic cotton technology was probably more evocative for his own generation than it was for young Heratis, some aspects of it were certainly current and accessible to all. The comedy of a threatened artisanal-class (perhaps rural-origin) woman entrapping powerful elite males in this rather unpleasant, certainly non-elite, activity would not be lost on any. Altogether, the Carpenter's Wife shows virtuous ability to manage female space and technology, not only in her own immediate defense, but ultimately to set up a modest income-generation scheme in cotton-processing, improving the economy of the household in her husband's absence. She shows no inclination or need to bring this arrangement to a close.

Once she has demonstrated her abilities, the scene returns to the Carpenter's own sphere of action, where the Qāzi (chief judge), now in charge, proves unequal to the task of defending the city, while the Carpenter

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devises a stratagem to delay invasion or extortion by the rival king. He has become a master carpenter and reveals that he is literate, able to write effective diplomatic prose. The King's own young son (about to be passed over for the succession) turns to the Carpenter for this rescue. The Carpenter is not himself a trickster—what he tells the rival king is true—but he easily recognizes the hand of his wife in the disappearance of the King, Vizier, and Vakil. He knows her powers as well as her virtue, it seems. He goes home to Herat to rescue them from her, restores them to their adult, elite male condition and appearance and advises them to go home and take up their responsibilities as leaders, which they instantly defer to him. As master of such a wife, the Carpenter also qualifies as a king, with a royal (though totally inert, iconic, undescribed) second wife bestowed as token of this status change. The hero's status/identity change, from urban-artisanal to royal, is of course the stock-in-trade of folktale fantasy. The trickster-wife has also transformed the potential male oppressors, at least temporarily, into feminized domestic slaves. That these transformations are accomplished through tricks, and women's tricks at that, recollects the trickster's function as transformer of the social and physical world in more radical, cosmogonic ways, in mythological contexts.

The disappearance of a supremely competent wife, virtuoso of the female sphere, into the figure of the husband in the end may disappoint contemporary feminist audience members, and indeed one can imagine this story reconfigured in the hands of a woman teller to leave the virtuous and powerful wife visible and in control at the end of the story, even in the context of royal polygyny. Another female trickster tale, also recorded in Herat in 1975, featuring another middle-class urban female protagonist, but told by Mādar Zāher, a master female storyteller, does precisely that (MILLS 2000b). For present purposes, I would argue, Wāhed's story is male-centered but not misogynist: the powerful woman is not threatening to the patriarchy and is in no way antisocial. Rather she protects her husband's interests, and is ultimately subsumed into them as part of the "household" that he moves lock, stock, and barrel to his new scene of triumph, where his own virtuoso competencies have also been displayed, enframing and setting in motion his wife's exploits.

The second of Wāhed's stories to be examined here entails a different kind of absorption of the hyper-competent female trickster into the male sphere.

SECOND STORY: ABDUL WĀHED, "THE VIZIER'S DAUGHTER"[10]

A king and a vizier engage their son and daughter to each other in childhood. The girl excels in school while the boy does not. The girl, as the most

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able student, is left in charge (as *xalifa*) of the school room by the teacher when the teacher must be absent. When the boy makes an error in recitation, she disciplines the boy by striking him as she has seen their teacher do. He plots revenge.

The boy asks his father to let the planned marriage go forward. After the wedding he begins to torture her physically, beating her, starving her, and hanging her in a well by her hair each night.

The girl keeps quiet about what is happening, but becomes thin and ill. The girl's mother and an old woman collaborate to find out what is happening. The old woman, visiting the girl in her marriage home, offers to groom her hair, finds the roots full of blood, and gets her to tell what is going on.

The old woman reports to the mother, then gives the girl a stratagem to send her husband off in quest of the Princess of China, to avoid further abuse. She has only to tell the Prince, "You give me more grief than the Princess of China gives her lovers." He will fall in love with the Princess at the mention of her name and depart to try to find her.

The Prince makes his way to China but fails in his attempt to woo the Princess, who demands that her suitors make her speak. By the merciful intervention of her father, the boy escapes the execution promised to failed suitors and instead is enslaved as a stable boy.

Meanwhile the King, missing his son, demands of the Vizier on pain of death that he produce the Prince. The girl, hearing of the threat to her father, gets her father to beg the King for more time, then goes off in male disguise to find and rescue her husband and save her natal family from the King's promised vengeance for the disappearance of his son.

The girl, while in male disguise, wins three fairy brides by helping their brother relieve the siege laid to their castle by an unwelcome suitor. She persuades their brother, who is their guardian and still believes she is male, that the marriage cannot take place until they all return to her home place, after she completes her quest.

The girl proceeds to China where she wins the Princess of China's hand by making her speak twice, with the help of two of her invisible fairy fiancees, who come at her secret command to the Princess's bedchamber and tell two dilemma tales (speaking from inside the lamp-stand and the bedframe respectively):

Subplot A: How three made a woman

a. A carpenter, a tailor, and a mullah (*mollā*), staying overnight in a mosque while traveling, take turns respectively carving, then dressing a female figure, and then praying for it to be given life, which it is.

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b. They argue about who should have the girl.
c. The Princess of China speaks in favor of the *mollā.*

Subplot B: How three women tricked their husbands

a. A queen, a vizier's wife, and a judge's wife argue over a jewel they find en route to the baths.
b. They decide that whoever plays the biggest trick on her husband will keep the jewel.
c. The queen's trick: She encourages a slave who wants to be her lover, hides him in a chest to avoid her husband's detection, then tells her husband it is her lover in the box, which causes the slave, overhearing, to die of fright. She then induces her husband to infer that the slave is just a slave, not really her lover, who has died by her own carelessness or cruelty and that she has just deposited him in the box to deflect blame for having killed him.
d. The vizier's wife's trick: She drugs her husband, then has him shaved, dressed in rags, and abandoned unconscious at a shrine, from whence he joins a merchant caravan and goes off as a beggar for a year. When he returns a year later, his beard regrown to a respectable length, she arranges for her servants to intercept the caravan, secretly drug his food again, and reinstate him in his former position while he sleeps. He thinks the year of beggary was a dream.
e. The judge's wife's trick: She maneuvers her husband into marrying her off, unrecognized because she is veiled, to another man of poor reputation, so that her husband must buy her out of the marriage to save his own face.
f. The women continue to argue about who should have the jewel. The Princess of China speaks up in favor of the judge's wife.

The vizier's daughter, still in male disguise, claims the Princess of China in marriage and also announces that she has come to China in quest of an escaped slave. She identifies her husband, working as a stable boy, as the lost servant and reclaims him from the King of China.

She returns home, still in disguise, taking the three fairy brides, the Princess of China, and her husband, still acting as a servant.

On arriving back at their home, she reveals herself to her husband and announces that henceforth, he will be married to the four women she has won for him, while she will serve as his vizier.

Story Analysis

It should first be said that Abdul Wāhed did not attach a title to this story during or after his performance, so the title cannot tell us which character he

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identifies as the protagonist in this story. I myself attached a title designating the story as "about" the Vizier's daughter for purposes of reference. This story offers a good deal more complexity than the first, in its array of male and female adversaries and allies of the trickster woman, and the range of strategies by which she prevails.

In this story as in the first, a clever and omnicompetent woman defends herself against a male oppressor, and in the process protects the interests of her husband, but in this case husband and oppressor are one and the same. Her immature and intemperate husband must in fact be rescued from himself, in order to make her own rescue complete. She also rescues her father and her natal family from the dangerous repercussions of her abusive marriage, which was arranged in an ideal patriarchal accord between her father and his patron, the King. Thirdly, she "tames" a murderously independent but irresistible "bride" who refuses to marry until she is made to speak.

The heroine's trickery (and that of her female allies) extends from strategically manipulative speech ("You give me more grief than the Princess of China gives her lovers"), to disguise, pretense, and even a little magic, in the person of her *pari* (fairy) fiancees, who arrive invisibly in the Chinese Princess's bedroom and take up residence in the lamp-stand and the bed, telling stories that sound as if they are coming from the Princess's own household furniture. The Princess is tricked into speaking by the beguiling and absorbing qualities of the narrative performance. Forgetting momentarily her own situation, she enters the dilemma tale realm first to adjudicate the rights of three men over one woman, and then the relative powers of three female tricksters. The narrative exercise reconnects her, both imaginatively and pragmatically, with the world of male-female relations which she has violently rejected. Her antisocial power of refusal is neutralized and replaced by good judgment, for her judgments on the story outcomes are just. She speaks up to correct the wrong adjudications being offered, deceptively, by the heroine and the second *pari,* who argue for rewarding the "wrong" parties in each story. Thus, in a way, the heroine's trick does not merely defeat her tyrannical "other," the Princess of China, but actually recruits her to the company of just (and married) women.

It should be said that, in striking the boy when he made a mistake in school, the vizier's daughter behaved as either a male or a female teacher would in a traditional schoolroom. As the teacher's *xalifa* (representative, substitute) she is responsible first and foremost for keeping order in the schoolroom. There is in that sense nothing tyrannical about her behavior; the boy rejects it because of her gender and her status as his future wife, not because of abuse of the authority delegated to her. Wāhed's story thus sets up what could be read as a critique of patriarchal gender-as-usual, a contrast

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between earned authority (the girl's position as "head student" in the school) and ascribed authority (male over female). In the logic of the opening scenes of the story, justice is on the side of the earned authority, not ascribed power. However, the same moral with a different gender configuration can be drawn from the Vizier's Daughter's contest with the Princess of China, who uses her authority to set up murderously tyrannical conditions for her wooing. That second contest is between arbitrary power and the strength of wisdom and ethical engagement, both parties being female. Taken as a whole, the story can be seen to critique and correct (in fantasy) the abuse of ensconced power by either gender.

The interplay of private and public space as areas of female and male endeavor is also much more intricate in this story than in the first. In this case, the male predator who gains access to female "safe" space is the young husband, who seconds his father's patriarchal plan (the marriage of the children) only to use the *andarun* not for sexual consummation (for he abandons the marital bed in favor of hanging her in a well in the house courtyard at night), but for a perversely brutal retaliation against his new wife's demonstrably superior intelligence and achievements. A woman's hair is the heavy artillery of her sexual powers and, properly covered, the symbol of her modesty. It is therefore significant that he hangs her by her hair in the well.[11] In this case, the heroine's victimization in a dark inner chamber within her own *andarun* or private female space underscores her vulnerability in particular contrast to the Carpenter's Wife's strategic exploitation of such a space.

The Vizier's Daughter, having first demonstrated her capacity to wield earned authority in the schoolroom, by her lack of complaint in her abusive new home demonstrates an ideal quality of the submissive wife, *tāqat* (endurance, fortitude). It is an act of heroic discretion on her part not to complain to anyone, even her own mother, about her husband's extreme behavior. Yet she is in danger of dying a victim in what should be her own space, and seems to have no escape stratagem. Her mother and another female elder, the ubiquitous, crafty nurse/go-between (cf. MILANI 1999), together diagnose her problem and intervene to give her a scheme to end the violence in her proper space. It is an imperfect solution, in that it results in the absence of her husband, which leads to other problems for which she alone develops a definitive solution.

In pursuit of her solution, in contrast to the Carpenter's Wife, she steps into the public male world of journeys and quests, and operates highly effectively as a pseudo-male while in disguise. We are not told that she was trained in martial arts, yet she excels in single combat against a besieging army. She seems to take on male competency along with male clothes and gear. Elsewhere, I have argued that this sort of trans-sexual behavior is more

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common in Afghan men's comparatively rare tales about women, than it is in women's storytelling (MILLS 1985). The inference was that men, in conceptualizing women as heroes, are much more likely to imagine them behaving as if they were men, since men's heroic agency is the ideal cultural form and more positively conceivable to them (as men) than female powers exercised within the female sphere. In these two stories, however, the male narrator sustains both forms of the imaginary with apparently equal ease.

The question of the female trickster's powers was not a focus of my earlier discussion, though it conditions all such disguise motifs. A woman's martial prowess is itself a form of trickery because it entails deceit about her actual gender. The Vizier's Daughter in her martial guise deceives both the *pari* brother and the wrong-headed besieging king, who believe her to be male. The king's vizier, wiser than he, has recognized her for a woman in battle, but the king bets with the vizier, his kingdom against the vizier's life, that she is male. The king sneaks into her sleeping chamber at night, finds he is wrong, but only escapes from her with his life by promising not to reveal her secret. He lies to his vizier, both to keep his oath to the girl and to keep his kingdom, and accordingly has his wisest adviser killed. The next day, the girl rides out and finishes off this most misguided male, showing mercy on the surviving portion of his army. In the process, she rescues the other women (and their male guardian, a protective brother) and thus wins additional female allies with magical powers of concealment, the promised *pari* brides.

The battle exploit in her pseudo-male phase is followed by another typical male exploit, penetrating the *andarun* where the romantic object lives a guarded existence, and passing the difficult tests laid down by the Princess of China or her father to woo her, in this case, to make her speak. Thus this trickster heroine's transsexual competencies encompass the key duality of Persian epic (and romance): *razm o bazm,* or combat and conviviality. She needed the help of older women allies to manage the danger in her own *andarun,* and here, too, she has powerful female allies; but here she is in control, while in male guise, and the scheme and the project are her own. Of course from her point of view the winning of this and other brides is but incidental to the quest of rescuing her decidedly unheroic, now enslaved, husband, and thus rescuing her father, the Vizier and the rest of her natal family, who will be wiped out if the Prince is not returned to his father's court. That royal families in both these tales show a distinct lack of leadership qualities is standard within the class dynamics of the folktale, with its strong preference for underdog heroes. Yet the bride serves patriarchy, serving her father directly and her unprepossessing mate incidentally.

The Vizier's Daughter wins her husband four other wives, the legal

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maximum, and thus removes herself from the marriage. That her apotheosis, revealing herself to her rescued husband, entails her pointedly excusing herself from further duties as a married woman, in favor of a permanent masculine-style relationship (she declares herself the Prince's vizier), male-centers this tale in a way quite different from conclusion of the Carpenter's tale. The Prince, with his cruelty and incompetence in the face of the Princess's tests, resembles a "false hero" or one of the "wrong brothers" in other tales, whom the hero outperforms and sometimes rescues. In this, he is not an obvious candidate for audience identification. The Vizier's Daughter, on the other hand, escapes into classificatory male status, to an honorable position as a wise advisor to royalty. This resolution accomplishes male-centering by the conversion of the female trickster-hero into a classificatory male. One could identify some latent misogyny in the implicit rejection of "wise and respected wife" as a possible final position for the Vizier's Daughter, except that the most competent "male" throughout this story happens to be female, and remains so, physically if not socially, in the conclusion. Gender bending in Wāhed's version of this tale allows the female trickster to institutionalize her gender ambiguity rather than simply to deploy it tactically.

Thus in these two female-trickster tales, two possible forms of female power are envisaged, both ultimately supportive of patriarchy. In the first, the virtuous wife is ultimately subsumed into the identity of the wise husband, while in the second, the woman transcends the female role and in the process shores up a patriarchy which conspicuously lacks the capacity to secure its own best interests. The male imaginary of traditional Persian-language popular culture includes possibilities for positive identification with the female, as well as fear of predatory females of various kinds (MILLS 1991). Positive portrayals of the female trickster in these examples, however, involve different forms of absorption of the female into male consciousness and social categories, rather than male projection into what might be deemed female consciousness.

NOTES

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1. E.g., *zan az šaytān haft qadam piš mira,* "Women are seven steps ahead of the Devil," or *zanān be šaytān ham dars mídehand,*"Women give lessons to the Devil himself"; see MILLS 2000a.

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2. JURICH (1998) states on page 29 that "If men see the trickster element in women at all, they limit their view to the conniving sorceress, the wily seductress." This may be more true of literary traditions and collections, as in Persian (MILLS 1999).

3. Insofar as deep structure can be understood as an open, or at least fuzzy-boundaried, range of possibilities for realization, rather than a single, essential or ideal "type," there is opportunity for further discussion of how a theory of deep structure could, and should, take account of polymorphism as a process rooted in social interaction, not just a condition of "the text(s)."

4. Injil District, Herat Province. Both Aminollah and his father were particularly aware of folklore methodology and supportive of the folklore research project, being the brother and father respectively of Dr. Hafizullah Baghban, an Indiana University–trained folklorist, who had already conducted research in the area on folk theater for his definitive dissertation (BAGHBAN 1977). I remain profoundly indebted to this family for their generosity and guidance.

5. Mills Tape LV: Taw Beryān, Injil District, Herat Province, 14. Feb. 1975, House of Nizāmuddin, father of Aminollah Azhar. Performance time: approximately 25 minutes.

6. Possibly a euphemistic request to be allowed to go and relieve himself, followed by ablution, prior to morning prayer.

7. In addition to one tale from India that rather similarly portrays the absent husband's wife as a resourceful ally of his ("The Clever Wife" in Maeve Stokes, *Indian Fairy Tales,* Calcutta 1879, 216–23), Jurich discusses two very differently framed variants of this story in which a woman incarcerates successive attempted seducers. Differences in the framing of the tricks make possible major differences in the reading of the woman's character. In "The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers," from the Thousand and One Nights as translated in DAWOOD 1973, 106–12, the woman acts not to protect her absent husband, whom she is cuckolding, but her lover, who has been imprisoned. She lures the officials to her home with sexual promises in order to secure his release and escape together with him. In "The Whore's Revenge," a Mande tale from Leo Frobenius's *African Nights: Black Erotic Folk-tales* (1979, 210–13), a whore rescues her brother from a slanderous legal prosecution (for allegedly patronizing a[nother] prostitute), by entrapping the judge, mayor, and chief priest, and enabling her brother to expose their hypocrisy. Chastity is not a qualification for either of these rescuing trickster heroines, nor do they act so conspicuously in support of the ideals of patriarchal domesticity, nor do either the rescued lover or the rescued brother figure as major actors in the tale centered on the woman's exploits.

8. There are various things about this offer that are fantastic. The King is evidently seeking to affiliate the Carpenter to his court rather than the other way around. In everyday practice, a girl's relatives (usually female) may sometimes approach a potential groom's family in which they are interested, but the reverse is much more frequent, and the girl would not wish to be a second wife, inferior in household power and status to the first. In woman-centered stories told by women, in mock laments and playlets (BAGHBAN 1977, vol. 4, 715–854), women condemn and seek to avoid polygamy.

9. Wāhed portrays the men as using the need to pray as an excuse to be set free. Prayer would also entail ablutions. The implication is that they are not allowed access to facilities to wash and groom themselves respectably, perhaps not to toilet facilities other than a chamber pot. Those locked in trunks and closets by defensive female tricksters are often explicitly made to defecate on themselves, even more definitively deprived of control over their bodily functions, thus infantilized as well as polluted and disgraced.

10. Title assigned by the collector (Mills Tape CCCLXXV-VII). The story was recorded in Taw Beryān Village, Herat Province, Aug. 27, 1975, in the home of Nizāmuddin, father of Aminollah Azhar. Also present, Aminollah Azhar and his father. This text in summary form

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was also presented and discussed in MILLS 2000a.

11. The treatment is similar to that which *divs* (demons) in folktales mete out to *paris* they kidnap, who refuse them their favors. The *pari* is subsequently rescued and the *div* killed by a questing male hero.

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